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ABSTRACT

This outline of a model for future expansion of information services to community agencies introduces the concept of "information consultation," which emphasizes the indirect services provided by one agency to another. The article is divided into three sections: (1) a review of mental health consultation, which offers existing, professional indirect services; (2) the development of a parallel definition of information consultation, with a discussion of the range of information consultation activities; and (3) a consideration of which agencies in the community might best provide information consultation services (public libraries and private agencies) and a review of how this would change their role in the community. (Author/JD)

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INFORMATION CONSULTATION:

Indirect Information Services for the Community

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of information consultation to incorporate all information services to community agencies and organizations. The existing field of mental health consultation is reviewed, and a parallel definition of information consultation is developed. Potential areas for information consultation services expansion are discussed.

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Overview

This article discusses a different area of information services - indirect services. Indirect services are those which are provided by one agency to another, with the aim of helping the second agency's clients. For example, the Public Health Department might train the staff of a teenage counseling center to perform simple pregnancy testing for their clients. As a result of the training, the recipient agency can provide a better mix of services to its clients.

Most library and information services are geared to providing information directly to clients. Within the information professions only limited indirect services are currently being provided. It is an area which is only partially developed - having nowhere near its potential impact.

A new service concept, information consultation, is put forth in this article to encompass the range of indirect services in information. The concept is modelled after the concept of mental health consultation, one of the best developed professional indirect service ideas. It is the aim of the article to lay out a model for information consultation which can serve as a base for future service expansion.

The article is divided into 3 sections. The first section reviews mental health consultation services. The second section defines information consultation and discusses the range of information consultation activities. The final section discusses which agencies in the community might be the

best providers of information consultation services, and reviews how this would change their role in the community.

Mental Health Consultation Services

Within the field of mental health, indirect services are a well defined service component. They are considered to be of equal importance to direct services. Indirect services are known by the name of mental health consultation, and defined as follows:

> "Mental health consultation is the provision of technical assistance by an expert to individual and agency caregivers related to the mental health dimensions of their work. Such assistance is directed to specific work-related problems, is advisory in nature, and the consultant has no direct responsibility for its acceptance and implementation. Consultation is offered by a mental health specialist either to other mental health workers less knowledgeable in some aspect of mental health, or to specialists in other fields who need assistance in the management of mental health and human relations problems." [1]

Mental health consultation is aimed at responding to certain community mental health needs which cannot be met by direct mental health services. The understanding is that a single agency, by itself, cannot respond to the full range of mental health needs in the community. Rather, a network of providers is needed, tying in all formal and informal service providers in the community. The community mental health center's role is to back-up the members of the network through the provision of a range of consultation services.

The direct services of a community mental health center are aimed at those individuals in the community for whom mental health is the pri-

mary problem. The mental health consultation services are for those individuals for whom mental health is a secondary problem, and other types of problems are primary. While some people in the community might have needs which are primarily mental health in nature, this is not always the case. More often than not, mental health needs are only one of a number of needs which an individual might have in a given situation. For example, first-time offenders who are arrested by the police might be faced with an extremely traumatic situation. For mental health agencies to provide services directly to clients in such cases would be very costly, and in large part unnecessary. Other service providers, such as policemen or legal aid lawyers, can deal adequately with the mental health aspects of the situation if they receive proper training. Mental health consultation services are designed to provide such training to agencies - thereby serving the mental health needs of the community indirectly.

Through mental health consultation, mental health agencies are able to have a much wider impact on community mental health than they would if those same efforts were put into direct services. In effect, the service staff of all other community service agencies become the staff dealing with the mental health of the community. In this manner, mental health services are provided as part of an overall set of services, and the mental health needs of clients are not divorced from other related needs. This helps promote the treatment of clients as whole beings, and prevents their segmentation into separate treatable parts.

Mental health consultation services are divided into 3 distinct types:

--Case Consultation: In case consultation consultant staff acts as

expert backup for the staff of other agencies who need assistance in handling the mental health dimensions of problem cases.

--Program Development Services: In program development consultation consultant staff facilitates the development of new mental health related programs by other agencies or consortiums of agencies.

--Agency Consultation Services: In agency consultation consultant staff assists other agencies with their own, in-house, mental health and human relations problems - helping develop the effectiveness of service delivery.

Case consultation is the form of mental health consultation most commonly provided by mental health agencies. Case consultation services are provided to both mental health and other staff members in community agencies. They are requested when a service worker in another agency encounters a case where the client has mental health needs which go beyond that worker's level of skill. For example, a social worker might be working with a client with severe emotional problems, and require advice form a psychological counselor in setting up a treatment plan. Similarly, a mental health counselor, whose area of expertise is with young adults, might need the advice of a gerontological specialist when creating a treatment plan for a senior citizen.

In case consultation the mental health specialist plays an advisory or training role. Seldom does the consultant play an active role in actually providing treatment to a consultee's client. If more intensive mental health treatment is required, a referral to the mental health center will be arranged, and necessary joint treatment plans created.

Program development consultation is provided to agencies who need help designing the mental health aspects of their new or expanding programs.

for example, the county probation department, looking to establish a first offenders pre-trial release program, might call upon mental health consultants to help them design client testing and psychological counseling components of the new program. Program development consultation, like case consultation, is an advisory, design, or training service. In program development consultation, the consultant is not trying to increase the services provided by the community mental health center - rather, s/he is attempting to spread the responsibilities for mental health problems to other agencies. This prevents mental health from becoming the sole responsibility of the mental health agency, and increases tremendously the impact on mental health needs of the community.

In agency consultation the focus for service is a whole organization, and not an individual service provider within it. The aim is to use mental health and human relations skills to help community agencies function better. Consultants work with organization staff to help them work better with one another and relate better to their clients. For example, a consultant might be requested to work with the staff of a local Community Action Program to help them resolve differences between paid staff and volunteers. Similarly, local hospital staff might request special cultural sensitivity training to help them relate better to minority clients. In all these cases, although the focus is on the mental health and human relations needs of the agency staff, the ultimate impact is upon the agency's clients, who receive better, more effective service.

There is a common thread which runs through all 3 of the mental health consultation services described above. Each service is a different means

of increasing the community's ability to respond to its mental health needs. As a result of these consultations, a lasting improvement of agency skills remains, increasing their ability to deal independently with new problem areas.

The Concept of Information Consultation

Introduction: Mental health consultation services are an effective means of indirectly meeting community mental health needs. Similarly, information consultation services can be an effective means of indirectly meeting community information needs. They can increase the ability of a wide range of community agencies to respond to these needs.

In this section, a proposed definition of information consultation, modelled after the definition of mental health consultation, is presented. In addition, 3 types of information consultation services are described in greater detail. The concept of information consultation developed in this section should provide a good basis for understanding existing indirect information services, and planning further indirect service expansion.

Definition of Information Consultation: Information can be defined in a manner parallel to the definition of mental health consultation:

> Information consultation is the provision of technical assistance by an expert to individual and agency caregivers related to the information dimensions of their work. Such assistance is directed to specific work-related problems, is advisory in nature, and the consultant has no direct responsibility for its acceptance and implementation. Consultation is offered by an information specialist either to other information specialists/ librarians less knowledgeable in some aspect of information work, or to specialists in other fields who need assistance in the management of information-related problems.

Within this definition, information consultation services can be divided into the same three types as are mental health consultation services:

--Case Consultation: In case consultation, consultant staff acts as expert backup for the staff of other agencies who need assistance responding to an inquiry from one of their clients.

--Program Development Services: In program development consultation, consultant staff facilitates the development of new information services by other agencies or consortiums of agencies.

--Agency Consultation Services: In agency consultation, consultant staff assists other agencies with their own, in-house, information related problems - helping develop the effectiveness of service delivery.

This definition of information consultation services places it squarely in the same realm as mental health consultation. The services are aimed at community information needs not already served by direct library and information services. They are designed to help, ultimately, individuals whose needs for information are secondary to other needs; leaving direct services to deal with those individuals whose primary needs are for information.

The ultimate aim of information consultation, as defined here, is to create a network of agencies in the community - all capable of responding to information needs. The provider of information consultation

services plays the role of backup to the other members of the network. In this role the consulting agency is continually stimulating the expansion of the community's ability to meet information needs.

Case Consultation Services in Information: In case consultation, the consultation staff are called by the information service staff of other agencies for assistance in answering specific requests from their clients. Case consultants act as a form of subject specialist, providing backup to other agencies on problem inquiries. This service can be provided to both professional and non-professional information staff alike.

This type of assistance does not entail the case consultant actually finding answers for the other agencies; rather, the consultant trains the agency staff to handle this and similar inquiries for themselves. It is the sort of situation which is most likely to occur when non-librarian information providers in different agencies receive requests which go beyond their present range of skill and knowledge. For example, a staff member of the local office of the Small Business Administration, responsible for providing basic business development information to clients, might be asked about the existence of national trade associations for appliance retailers. A case consultant responding to the request would work with the SBA, walking the staff member through the process of identifying national associations. The agency staff member would be the one to actually secure the answer, and would be responsible for providing it to its own clients. In this manner, case consultation expands the question answering abilities of local agencies - indirectly improving the network

of community information services.

Case consultation can be provided to a wide variety of different information providers in the community. Professional, full-time information providers, including both public and special librarians, and non-professional information providers can both benefit from such a service. Case consultation services can be provided by consultant staff or by referral to other specialists in the community. These referral relationships could be similar to the many informal reference networks that already exist among special librarians.

Program Development Services in Information: Within most communities there is a large number of agencies who provided information to their clients either as a primary or secondary service. For example, a local Community Action Program, primarily in the business of providing social services to poor people, also has a sideline in the provision of information - keeping their clients informed of their rights regarding foodstamps, welfare, unemployment and public housing. Library and information professionals can play an important role in helping this type of agency develop new, more effective information services for their clients.

In program development consultation, consultants will work with potential information service providers, assisting them in all aspects of program development. Consultants can work in the actual design of new programs for other agencies - including needs assessment, acquisition procedures, storage procedures, retrieval systems, and dissemination

procedures. Consultants can also work in the training of agency staff in the implementation, operation, and maintenance of newly designed systems.

In some instances, the consultant can actually be a catalyst for the development of new information services. Rather than just respond to requests, the consultant can seek out agencies who could potentially play an important role in meeting community information needs - alerting them to the need, and helping them, if necessary, design effective programs. In addition, the consultant can stimulate the coordinated planning of new programs by several agencies by calling together joint meetings around important unaddressed information needs.

Few other agencies currently have a good understanding of information needs, and how information services can be used to meet them. Program development consultation is the most effective way of developing this understanding. As a result of this service, a number of new programs will become institutionalized in a wider range of community agencies. Consultee agencies will independently be able to provide information to their clients.

Agency Consultation Services in Information: Agency needs for information have recently become the center of considerable attention. Agency needs refer to the needs for information to be used by the staff in the performance of their duties. For example, the staff of a public housing authority has a continuing need to keep abreast of the latest Federal regulations to be able to perform their jobs effectively. This is in clear contrast to the information needed by agency clients. Program development consulta-

tion services are aimed at developing systems to meet the needs of agency clients. Agency consultation services are aimed at developing systems to meet the in-house needs of agency staff.

In a given community, the majority of agencies and organizations do not employ full or part-time library and information specialists to help them with their in-house information needs. Most agencies have only informal and rudimentary in-house 'libraries' or other information systems. Often, staff members must rely on their own personal collections of materials in performing their job-related duties.

Most times the personal information-seeking of staff members is adequate to keep agencies operating without too much difficulty. However, there are many instances when even a small investment in information can drastically increase an agency's effectiveness. For example, in our own organization's work with community agencies, we encounter many programs with no good understanding of what Federal, state, or local funding sources are available to them. With minimal effort we have helped them set up basic grant information systems, which has helped them to stay on top of available monies.

In agency consultation, in-house information systems are designed and staff trained so that agencies can become relatively independent in meeting their own information needs. Agency consultation can be provided to any local organization, public or private, regardless of whether they provide information to their clients. For example, a consultant might help a local health clinic set up a professional library for its medical staff,

even though that library is not open to the public. This is in contrast to the 2 other types of information consultation, which are primarily aimed at agencies which are information service providers.

Within the confines of agency consultation, two very different types of services can be provided to organizations:

--Internal information: An organization might receive help analyzing needs and setting up in-house systems to control the flow of internal information. This would be work similar to that already done by information systems analysts and those responsible for the establishment of management information systems. The result would be a system capable of monitoring and reporting on program performance.

--External information: An organization might receive help analyzing staff needs and setting up in-house systems to keep staff informed of pertinent matters outside the agency. This would take the form of designing special library type systems for staff reference, research, and current awareness, and training non-librarian staff in their maintenance and operation.

It should be mentioned, in passing, that although the area of agency consultation is, in many ways, the newest and most 'different' of the 3 types of information consultation services, significant strides have been made already. Two Federally-funded research projects are currently being conducted which focus on how to meet the information needs of agencies in the local communities.[2] These projects are beginning to lay the groundwork for the practice of agency consultation.

The Organization of Information Consultation Services in the Community

Introduction: Information consultation services can be provided by several different organizations in local communities. Public library systems, normally the single largest information resource in the community, are the logical first choice for providing them. Private information agencies, and local information 'free-lancers', already in the business of providing some consultation services, are also potential sources. In this section of the article, the possible roles of these two organizations in providing information consultation services will be discussed.

Information consultation services can probably best be provided by a network of different organizations. Other types of organizations beyond those discussed here could easily be involved. For example, state libraries or land grant universities could provide such services as part of library extension. The aim of this section is not to exhaustively list all possible providers of these services. Rather, it is to analyze more closely the roles of the two pre-eminent locally-based sources of these services.

Public Libraries as Information Consultation Agencies: Public library systems have a natural role in the provision of information consultation services. Currently, libraries are heavily involved in responding to information needs by means of direct services. With no major change in organizational purpose, this role can be extended to filling some needs indirectly. Some expansion of services to new clientele might be required.

However, in many cases, these organizations are all ready being served with direct services - through special business, municipal, government document and general reference collections. With some restructuring of current service components, public libraries could become the hub of information consultation services in the community; in much the same way as community mental health centers are the hub of mental health consultation services in the community.

The public library has a strong potential role in providing all three types of information consultation. Of the three, case consultation is the most clear-cut area for public library activity. Providing this service would, in effect, be an extension of current reference services, with a shift in emphasis towards teaching clients how to find specific answers, rather than the actual provision of answers. Special reference staff, skilled in reference training, could be placed in a separate reference division for other agency staff. This division would be able to handle most inquiries from both professional and non-professional staff.

Certain inquiries, particularly those of an in-depth technical nature, or those requiring specialized reference materials, would need to be handled by subject specialists in other library divisions. Insofar as public libraries have these specialists on staff, there should be no problem handling these inquiries . In some cases, however, inquiries will need to be referred elsewhere. For example, a question regarding detailed census data might be referred to the staff of the local city planning department, if they are the only ones who have the needed materials. For this type of referral to take place effectively, the public library

would need to facilitate the creation of community-wide reference networks between local agencies, organizations, and special libraries.

Program development consultation services might also be provided through local public library systems. The planning and program development staffs of libraries might be expanded to serve the needs of other agencies in the community. At present, these staffs work on the creation of more general-purpose information systems - systems aimed at the general public. Staff more skilled in the design and operation of more specialized library and information systems might have to be added. Also, staff capable of training non-professional agency staff in information service operations would also be required.

The participation by public libraries in program development consultation activities would mark a significant change in the role of many public libraries. It would signify a commitment by libraries to coordinated planning for the full range of both general and special community information needs. The public library would be involved in designing services for many new groups of clients - implicitly recognizing that many information services can best be provided through outlets other than libraries. The library would become the catalyst for development of community information services, developing many new, non-traditional sponsorships for such services. It would take on a much more important support role for community special library and information services.

Nowhere would the public library's new support role be more evident than in its agency consulting activities. Agency consulting would represent

the biggest change in the library's current role. As with program development consulting, the target of services would be other agencies. However, where with program development consultation the ultimate aim is to serve the information needs of the agency's clients, in agency consultation the aim is to serve the information needs of the agency's staff. With agency consultation, the public library would clearly define a new role as a catalyst for special libraries.

Agency consultation services in the public library could be organized in a manner similar to program development consultation services. The same staff skills in service design and training would be required. Additional skills in the area of organizational development would also be useful. For the most part, though, the services could be provided by the same staff as provides program development consultation, since the ends of the two services are identical - the development of new information services to be sponsored and operated by other organizations.

Private Information Agencies in Information Consultation: The information 'free-lancers', including such firms as Information Access, Information for Business, and INFORM, have raised considerable interest within the information professions recently.[3] They provide, in return for a fee, specialized question-answering services to their clients, usually business, industry and government organizations. Information consultation services form a natural adjunct to these other services, and private information agencies, both profit and non-profit, have a strong potential role in providing them.

Some free-lance organizations have already begun to move in the direction of providing information consultation services. For example, one organization, Information Access, developed a basic library for a family planning agency.[4] This design and training contract falls within the realm of program development consultation.

There is some potential conflict between private agencies' current services and information consultation services. The one, question-answering or reference services, creates a dependent relationship between client and consultant. The other, information consultation, fosters the independence of clients by increasing their abilities to answer questions for themselves.

This conflict is not as large a problem as it might first appear. For the most part, clients for the 2 different types of services are different. Clients for information consultation services are not often in a position where they could afford to retain question-answering services. Similarly, clients for question-answering services normally need information quicker and more comprehensively than they could get it for themselves, and are willing to pay others for the services. As a result, expansion by private information agencies to provide information consultation services would not reduce the demand for its question-answering services.

Conclusion

The concept of indirect services, presented in this article, is meant as a spur for discussion within the library and information service professions. The concept is a direct outgrowth of our organization's work providing technical assistance to other agencies. Our experience has indicated to us that information consultation has an enormous potential for meeting information needs in the community - a potential that puts it easily on a par with direct services. At present, this potential is only minimally being realized. Increased analysis of the possibilities, and accelerated discussion of them by information providers should help in the recognition of the need for indirect services.

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--This entire volume is a good survey of the field of mental health consultation.

(2) The two projects are the Health Information Sharing Project and the Gerontological Information Program, both special research projects of the Syracuse University School of Information Studies.

--An earlier project in the same direction is summarized in Javelin, M.C.; Analyzing Information Needs of Local Community Organizations: A Case Study; in Library Trends; 24:3; January 1976; pps. 527-39.

(3) For a good overview of the discussions, see:

--Canadian Library Journal; 34:2; April, 1977; special edition on Alternatives in Librarianship, edited by Susan Klement.

(4) Based upon personal communication with Marine Davis of Information Access, January 1977.